

A JOYLESS LAND?

Shehzad Ghias Shaikh

Pakistan doesn't really do 'joy' - every moment of joy felt by a Pakistani comes with pangs of guilt; the nagging feeling that you are doing something wrong. Every action by a Pakistani must be in service of God, or the country, or the family. Joy itself has been colonised out of us.

It, then, comes as no surprise that Joyland was banned in Pakistan. A film depicting that joyless feeling. A film for Pakistanis made by Pakistanis showing Pakistan. A film made by a talented group of individuals looking to express themselves. It is futile to even discuss what is it in the movie that the censor board found offensive because it is pointless, as it was in the case of Zindagi Tamasha. Both films cleared the censor board only to be banned because somebody on the internet found something offensive and threatened violence.

If that is to be the criteria for banning art then we might as well ban art, joy, and expression altogether. Good art is meant to placate the grieved and rattle the comfortable. There is no expression that manages to offend no one in the world, especially in the increasingly 'offended' world that we live in. How does any artist make sense of the censor board policy when the entire state apparatus collapses in the face of online backlash?

Joyland is being celebrated around the world, winning awards and hearts everywhere it is shown yet the audience that it has been made for is being denied a chance to watch it. Even the censorship is arbitrary and senseless; in Karachi a scene of a husband and wife hugging was censored but as you walk out of the cinema you see a giant poster of an upcoming movie with two couples hugging each other. We regularly have movies with scantily clad women doing item numbers - one such movie was not only not banned but also sponsored by the state.

The religious feelings of the masses are never hurt seeing women being objectified on screen. They are not even hurt

watching women being physically abused by their husbands in almost every single drama on TV yet Zindagi Tamasha was banned because people were offended watching a man with a beard dance in the trailer. I doubt movies like Khuda Kay Liye and Bol would even be allowed to launch in the current climate.

An alleged wife beater and a western fashion designer led online protests to ban Joyland. It is impossible to make sense of it all as an outsider but as a theatre historian none of it is surprising to me. When theatre groups like Ajoka were not being allowed to perform during Zia's tenure we still had stage shows with mujras on at places like Al-Hamra in Lahore. Zia-ul-Haq, under the guise of Islamization, made a big show of clamping down on the Shahi Mohalla behind the Badshahi Masjid but mujras were still routinely held during that era.

The key to solving these apparent contradictions is to understand how fear, control and patriarchy intersect in Pakistan. Mujras can be held during the Islamization era and Neelum Muneer can be shown during an item number in a state sponsored film directed by Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar because they depict the 'other' woman - these are women who need to be put up to society to show what happens when you go outside the prescribed circle. It doesn't undermine the piousness of Pakistan because it shows the Madonna-Whore Complex at play; if women want to be respected then they must act in a certain way otherwise they will be seen as objects that only exist for the male gaze. This is why people like Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar see no irony in sermonising about religion and women on TV before going on to direct a movie like 'Kaaf Kangna'.

'Islamic', 'cultural', and 'national' values are just euphemisms the state uses to ban anything that they see as a challenge to the status quo. An item number may be against the Islamic, cultural and national values of Pakistan but if it furthers the interest of the state then those values will never be invoked to

get that film banned - and a central tenet of our state is patriarchy. The entire apparatus of the state was used to crush the Aurat March - the self proclaimed vanguards of these undefined cultural values were out in full force against it. It was the same thing when legislation was proposed against domestic violence and the same recently when the Trans protection bill was tabled.

An autocratic state will always be misogynistic and transphobic. It cannot allow the subjects to fully express themselves. A film that seeks to do that might teach others to do the same; to feel joy, to be themselves and to express themselves. This cannot be allowed. The colonial legacy of Pakistan has ingrained this fear of the people in the state. The Government and the Bureaucracy is taught how to control the people rather than to build an environment where they can be free: free expression is something to be feared, not encouraged.

It is this patriarchal nature of the state, fear of expression and the presumed need to control the people which is why a film like Joyland is banned. Everything else is noise. YouTubers who have made a career out of exploiting religion will never speak up against the actions of the status quo that go against the religion - it is much easier to create fear around a movie like Joyland to bring in views to make millions on YouTube.

The ban on Joyland has nothing to do with Islam or Pakistani culture. It comes from those afraid of joy; afraid of those looking to express themselves in this joyless land that we call Pakistan, where trans people can be depicted in a movie if they are being mocked but cannot be genuinely represented, where women can dance to satiate the male gaze but cannot control the narratives - and any expression that challenges these notions becomes a threat to the status quo. This is why Joyland was banned.

The author is a comedian, Fulbright scholar, and host of The Pakistan Experience, one of the fastest growing podcasts in the country.

